

ROMANIA'S ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION TO MAKING A LONG WORLD WAR II SHORTER

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Abstract: *Romania's participation in World War II was brought about by political reasons and strategic needs that resulted from the international political situation at the middle of the twentieth century. One can hardly say that Romania did not do its best to avoid becoming involved in the war. From September 1939 to June 1941, the foreign policy laid focus on non-belligerency and neutrality. But eventually Romania was drawn in, too, right after the series of unfortunate events in the summer of 1940*

Keyword: *economic contribution, Statistic Service, Romanian currency*

Jel classification: N10 - General, International, or Comparative

Romania's participation in World War II was brought about by political reasons and strategic needs that resulted from the international political situation at the middle of the twentieth century. The loss of approximately one third of the national territory and of six million inhabitants to the three neighbouring countries (that is the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria) basically accounted for Romania's taking part in military operations on both the East and the West front during World War II¹.

One can hardly say that Romania did not do its best to avoid becoming involved in the war. From September 1939 to June 1941, the foreign policy laid focus on non-belligerency and neutrality². But eventually Romania was drawn in, too, right after the series of unfortunate events in the summer of 1940³, so that on the 22nd of June

¹ Aurică Simion, *Dictatul de la Viena (the Vienna Dictate)*, București, Editura Albatros, 1996

² Ion Constantin: *România, Marile Puteri și problema Basarabiei (Romania, the Great Powers and the Issue of Basarabia)*, București, Ed. Enciclopedică, 1995, pp. 27-41

³ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Serban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *Istoria României (The History of Romania)*, Ed. Enciclopedică București 1999, pp 449-451

1941, Romanian troops were crossing the Prut as ordered by the head of the state at the time, General Ion Antonescu¹.

As far as the requirements of waging a modern war are concerned, Romania was taken aback by the outbreak of the war. Romanian effective forces, though in large number², lacked in modern equipment and war techniques that such a conflagration asks for³.

The wall of fire and steel which the leaders of the time spoke of in order to reassure people and public opinion turned out to be a bluff made up by the for the sake of propaganda by the authoritarian monarchic regime. Within few weeks, Romanian frontiers would collapse under the pressure of the most important political and military forces of the time that is Hitlerite Germany and the Soviet Union, dragging along Carol II's regime.

The new head of the state, Ion Antonescu, would start at once reconstructing the army, as he was well aware that ongoing international political events could provide Romania with an opportunity to make its borders stand again and to reintegrate all territories that had been temporarily under foreign rule. Antonescu was to join forces with the Axis and wage war against the Soviet Union, as strongly believed that the Axis stood a firm chance of winning the war⁴.

The military campaign led by the Romanian army on the East front had as an objective to set free Basarabia and the North of Bucovina, territories which had been torn apart by the Soviet Union as a result of the ultimatum delivered in June 1940⁵. It is also true that Ion Antonescu was hoping that an estimation of Romania's siding with Germany could bring along the retrocession of Ardeal; that was the very same reason for which Hungary also sent troops to the East front and declared war to the Soviet Union⁶.

¹ Florin Constantiniu, Ilie Schipor, *Trecerea Nistrului 1941*, București, Editura Albatros, 1995, pp 163-170

² Alessandru Duțu, Florica Dobre, Leonida Loghin, *Armata română în cel de-al doilea război mondial 1941-1945 (The Romanian Army during World War II 1941-1945)*, București, Ed Enciclopedică, 1999, pp 213-214

³ G-ral Tiberiu, Urdăreanu, *Factorul ethnic in razboaiele Romaniei Moderne (Modern Romania's Techniques of Waging War)*, Editura Militară București 1994, pp. 153-173, 183-258

⁴ Constantin, Kirițescu, *Romania during World War II*, București, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, 1995, pp. 187-192

⁵ Valeriu-Florin, Dobrinescu, Ion Constantin, *Basarabia during World War II*, Institutul European, Iași 1995 pp 216-221

⁶ Florin, Constantiniu, *The Romanian Communist Party, Pătrășcanu and Transylvania (1945-1946)*, București, Ed Enciclopedică 2001, p. 51: *the only reason for which we sent troops against the Russians were the Romanians*, stated the Hungarian Prime-Minister Miklos Kallay, around the years 1942-1944

Owing to the alliance with Germany, the two provinces were set free in July, not without major human sacrifice¹, and political controversy whether or not war against the Soviets should be waged beyond the Nistru soon broke out between political opposition, represented by the *historical parties*, and marshal Antonescu's government. It stands to reason that the head of the state had the last say in this matter and that Romanian soldiers would go and fight in the wilderness of Russia. They fought courageously besides German allies who would often show gratitude for their support and sacrifice.

Three times were the Romanian and German troops defeated, in Stalingrad, in Crimea and on the Moldavian front Iași - Chișinău, and the defeats meant military disaster as they put an end to the Romanian campaign on the East front. The campaign had taken three years and two months (the 22nd of June 1941 – the 23rd of August 1944). The defeat of the Romanian army on the front in Moldova during the Soviet offensive Iași – Chișinău, together with the effects of the blow at the palace and the arresting of the marshal and his people would eventually result in Romania's withdrawal from its alliance with Germany² against a country which had taken away a big part of our national territory³.

In the new political context, the Romanian authorities in Bucharest would manage to stand alone and face Germany's anger; Romanian troops disarmed and set free most part of the national territory, including the capital, and paved the way for the Soviet Army. As for the significance and the importance of what happened on the 23rd of August, it has become clear by now that the act will always be interpreted according to the evolution of political events⁴.

Nevertheless, the Romanian troops' volte-face would have unpleasant consequences, especially on the front in Moldova. As soon as the Romanian army units received an order to cease fire against the Soviet army and they were loose from the German troops to withdraw at once to the south of the fortified frontline Focșani-Nămoloasa-Brăila⁵, the commanding officers would obey the Department of Military Structures and cease hostilities against the Red Army, trying to save what could still be saved of the Romanian army after the front had been broken by the Soviets⁶.

¹ Constantin, Kirițescu, op cit p. 269

² Alessandru, Duțu, op cit pp. 214-216

³ C-tin, Kirițescu, op cit p 188

⁴ Lily Marcou, *Under Stalin and Dej, the Memoirs of a left-wing politician*, Ed Antet, pp 68-87. The writer looks back on the events, making allowances for a growing communist society

⁵ Al Duțu, op cit p 170

⁶ Ibidem . further reference , the talks between marshal Antonescu and the representatives of the Romanian Army IV, on the necessity of withdrawing along this fortified frontline in the South

The Soviet commanding structures would make no allowances for this new situation, ordering Fronts II and III in Ukraine to continue the offensive against the enemy. Thus, a large number of Romanian soldiers who had ceased fire were taken prisoners and, strangely enough, they were held prisoners until the 12th of September and even afterwards¹. The condition of the officers and crew in the Danube Delta and on the Black Sea turned out to be just as disastrous. They were made to cease fire on receiving orders from the Romanian authorities and then forced to land and confined to Soviet camps. This is how a large part of the Romanian trading ships and, of course, the whole of the war fleet was lost to the Soviets².

Romanian soldiers would still be captured by Soviet troops even after the truce was concluded on the 12th of September; strangely enough, most of them were captured in areas where no military operations between Romanian and Soviet forces had been carried out, such as Muntenia / Walachia. All these were happening while Romanian soldiers had to face German attack, too, for the Germans had received the Fuhrer's command to restore the situation in Romania, which threatened to cause the collapse of the entire German military device in the Balkans.

On the 23rd of August 1944, the Romanian military campaign in the war against the Soviets came to an end, not without big casualties as far as the number of missing people was concerned, not to mention the material losses in which bombardment, the seizure of territories and the military techniques resulted. Since 1942, Romania was the most important ally of Germany on the East front, as it disposed of some 26 Romanian divisions as compared to the eight Italian ones, the twelve Hungarian divisions and the varying number of Finnish military units. Obviously, among the 46 allied military units that the Germans could dispose of on the East front, more than half the number was represented by the Romanian units; as a consequence, it was only normal that Romania suffered significant human losses, directly proportional to the number of soldiers that had been sent to the front.

In October 1945, an informative note of the Statistic Service of the Romanian army was issued to estimate the total human losses during the campaign in the East to 309,503 military men. Mention should be made of the fact that the figures referred both to the ones taken prisoners and to those who had died on the battlefield, since the Romanian Department of Military Structures did not have the means to count the dead and the prisoners separately³.

¹ Archives of the Defense Department, fund 948, file 1799, pp 23-24. The number of Romanian military men captured on the front in Moldova is somewhere between 60,000 and 160,000 prisoners. The most likely figure is provided by the Department of Military Structures, i.e. 130,000

² Idem, fund 379, file 10, p. 45

³ Idem, fund 948, file 1585, pp 14-22

The economic cost of waging war alongside Germany turned out to be of no lesser importance; on the 23rd of August, Romanian economy was under the control of German capital, as Germany's debt to the Romanian state went up to some 1.5 billion deutsche marks. Calling up a significant military contingent was to diminish Romania's capacity for industrial production, whereas the country had to go to great lengths to keep the same production rate as before. Moreover, as Romania moved towards an economy war, many financial and economic resources which were normally meant for various other enterprises were now taken up to keep Romanian troops on the front¹. Allied bombardments, particularly on the major economic centers, will also result in significant losses for Romanian economy; oil industry was mainly aimed at, and human losses did not lack in significance. Among indirect damage and losses induced upon Romanian economy, mention should be made of exchanges which did not amount to Romanian currency as the deutsche mark was made to go up artificially as compared to the Romanian *leu*; thus the price of the products imported from Germany went up without any regard for the price of Romanian goods for export²; at the same time, the purchasing power of the German military increased and they would take certain products off the Romanian market only to cause their price to go up artificially.

The support given to German troops on Romanian territory, the payment system, the deductions that resulted from transport and communication were further issues to be tackled during collaboration with the Third Reich in the war against the Soviets. Whereas German military units and import-export companies purchased essential goods at very low prices, the products imported from Germany were of little necessity to the Romanian market and they came in at extremely high prices. Romania's complex international position made the country extremely vulnerable when confronted with the terms of the German ally which was well aware of the fact that Romania could not object under the circumstances. These were some of the reasons which cast a shadow on the co-operation between Romania and Germany and they were mainly accounted for by the fact that, on accepting to become involved in the military campaign on the East front, Romanian authorities had overlooked some details, although, legally, Romania's position was, to a certain extent, that of an independent, autonomous state fighting against mutual enemy. Obviously, the two armies had not joined forces in response to some military or political convention; Romania joined in the war of its own accord with a view to setting Basarabia and Bucovina free.

The events on the 23rd of August were to bring about deep changes, as far as Romania's foreign policy was concerned; all of a sudden, Romania was made to

¹ Constantinescu, N. N. *Istoria Economiei Naționale (The History of National Economy)*, București, Editura Economică, 2000, vol. II p. 60

² Ibidem p66

fight - with the same objectives in mind - by the side of its former enemies and against its former allies. This sudden turn was sure to serve the cause of the United Nations, but Romania would have to pay dearly for it; for a while, Romanian authorities and military forces *had to resist two enemies* and part of the price it had to pay was the large number of Romanian soldiers who had been taken prisoners by Soviet troops¹.

Despite the significant losses of human lives, war materials and techniques, due to cautious course of action taken by the Romanian Department of Military Structures, Romania was able to present, on the 23rd of August, five operational divisions fully equipped for war and some other 29 divisions consisting mainly of recruits and other units which were billeted with the non-mobile troops on the battlefield. Romanian military units around the front area were not very well organized as they had been destroyed by Soviet offensive, that is why the military campaign against Nazi Germany was mainly carried out by these divisions of recruits provided inland by the Department of Military Structures.

The concluding of the Truce Convention by Romania and the United Nations on the 12th of September imposed the most significant terms as to how Romania should carry out the military campaign against Germany and its allies. The provisions were to be brought into operation under the control of an Allied (Soviet) Control Commission which, as the three great powers had established, would basically leave it to the Soviet Union. The rough interference of the representatives of the commission for control was to change the course of home policy and to affect the balance of the state budget, as goods were drawn in keeping with the Truce Convention.

Romanian authorities were determined to improve collaboration with the Soviet Union as soon as possible and to set Transylvania free, that is why they would send to the front more units than the 12 military divisions that the truce asked for, thus moving towards applying the economic provisions of the convention. As for the number of Romanian military men involved in military operations against German troops, it amounted to some 538,536 soldiers out of a total of 1,100,000 who had been called up to serve the cause of the United Nations. Between the 23rd of August 1944 and the 12th of May 1945, Romanian troops had traveled for about 1,700 kilometers at around 6 kilometers a day, they moved across 12 waterways and 20 groups of mountains and they took 3,831 villages and towns, among which there were 53 big cities. All these were accomplished through the sacrifice made by 169,822 military men who were killed, injured or declared missing. The strategic, material and human support Romania gave to the United Nations was significant enough and it helped make the war shorter by some 200 days.

¹ *The Archives of the Defense Department*, fund 514, file 8, p. 96

Although its support amounted to 1,200,000,000 dollars (1938 currency) and it came fourth in the hierarchy of the United Nations that fought against Germany, Romania was not granted the status of co-belligerent country which it was entitled to. The refusal was based on some political reasons that only the Great Powers knew of. Among all the states that had a similar situation, Romania had taken the greatest efforts to destroy the Nazi war machine¹.

Despite the fact that it may have varied to some extent in keeping with the provisions of the Romanian-Soviet protocol on the 26th of November, the number of Romanian troops involved in military operations was always higher than the one imposed by the Truce Convention. Moreover, Romania's contribution hardly knew any limits²: both the authorities and the civil population went to great lengths to support the military campaign of Romanian troops. No military unit or organization carried on the fight against the United Nations after the 23rd of August. For example, Italy contributed some 100,000 partisans to the cause of the United Nations, whereas 5 infantry divisions and 2 air-force squadrons would carry on fighting in the north of Italy on Germany's side. As for Hungary, they came up with 10 divisions, Bulgaria – one pro-Nazi division, Yugoslavia – 3 divisions, 9 brigades, a division of guards and a regiment of cavalry. In France the number of those who carried on fighting soon amounted to the effective force of a quick division, whereas in Poland it amounted to some 20-25,000 military men³. The statement Romania made at the Peace Conference in Paris dwelled on the country's military and economic direct involvement and on the extent to which they had discharged their duties until the 1st of July 1945 in keeping with article 3 of the Convention; expenses came to 77 billion lei (1938 currency).

The defeat of Nazi Germany saluted by most countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe did not bring about utter joy since the alternative was now the communist regime imposed on by the Soviet model. The alternative was rejected by most Eastern European societies⁴ which were still vexed by the war and by the release of the Red Army. Hundreds of thousands of people were to fully experience the *advantages of the Soviet release* and the consequences of their countries' political regimes turning into *popular regimes* under Soviet influence.

The fact that these *popular democratic regimes* were forced upon the states in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe would prevent further economic progress of these societies; we all had to pay tremendous costs to return to an efficient state, and we are still paying them today, more than 50 years after the conflagration. But little

¹ A.N.I.C.B., *Royal House fund*, file 21/1945, pp. 1-12

² *Archives of the Defense Department*, fund 948, file 177, *passim*

³ *Idem*, file 151, pp 105-110

⁴ Stephen, Fischer, Galați, *Eastern Europe and the Cold War*

mention is made of the moral trouble, the personal failures or the fear in which most inhabitants of these countries lived, particularly the war prisoners. They have come a long way; they were first regarded as heroes on the battlefield, subsequently they were considered traitors to their country, as they were accused of having fought against the Soviet Union and of having upset the actual “big brother” that meant to control all East-European states and under the influence of which these states would embrace communism in their social and political structures.

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13. ****The Archives of the Defense Department*, fund 514, file 8, p. 96;

14. ***A.N.I.C.B, *Royal House* fund, file 21/1945, pp. 1-12;
15. ****Archives of the Defense Department*, fund 948, file 177, passim.